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Archbishop Burke sad to leave St. Louis

by Jennifer Brinker by Catholic News Service

ST. LOUIS (CNS) -- Archbishop Raymond L. Burke didn't hide his sadness during a news conference June 27 in St. Louis following his appointment as prefect of the Supreme Court of the Apostolic Signature at the Vatican.

Calling the appointment "bittersweet," the archbishop said, "I am deeply honored and also humbled by the trust which Pope Benedict XVI has placed in me. I have pledged the Holy Father to serve him with all my energies to the best of my abilities. I ask you to please pray for me, as these are obviously challenging responsibilities which I will be taking up."

Several minutes into the meeting, he paused and his eyes began to tear up. His reaction was met with loud applause from archdiocesan employees who were there.

Archbishop Burke, who turned 60 June 30, is the first U.S. bishop to be named prefect of the Apostolic Signature, which is the Vatican's highest court.

When the appointment was announced at the Vatican, Archbishop Burke ceased to be archbishop of St. Louis, where he had served for almost four and a half years.

The archdiocesan college of consultors met the afternoon of June 27 and elected Bishop Robert J. Hermann to serve as archdiocesan administrator until the pontiff names a new archbishop of St. Louis. Bishop Hermann, 73, has been an auxiliary bishop of St. Louis since 2002.

As head of the Supreme Court of the Apostolic Signature, the archbishop will hear appeals of decisions issued by lower church courts. Many of the cases handled by the court are appeals to sentences of the Roman Rota dealing with marriage annulments.

Archbishop Burke said he learned of the appointment 10 days before when he received a call at his residence from Archbishop Pietro Sambi, apostolic nuncio to the United States.

"There's a sadness at the thought of leaving St. Louis, as I've become so deeply involved in the life of the church here," Archbishop Burke said in an interview with the St. Louis Review, archdiocesan newspaper, after the press conference.

A native of Richland Center in the Diocese of La Crosse, Wis., he said that when he arrived as archbishop in 2004 he didn't "have any association with St. Louis at all. But I quickly came to experience ... the wonderful Catholic families in this archdiocese."

"The roots of the Catholic faith are so long here and deep, and they're nurtured in good homes," he continued. "Everywhere I go in the archdiocese, I meet the most wonderful faithful."

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Prior to this most recent appointment, Archbishop Burke was named to two Vatican posts in May: the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts and the Congregation for Clergy. The archbishop said he will retain those positions. In 2006, he was appointed as a judge for the Apostolic Signature.

Asked if those appointments were a tip-off of something greater to come, the archbishop said, "It made me a bit concerned. I was honored by the trust, but I was becoming concerned that it might be an indication of (the Vatican) wanting me more full time."

Archbishop Burke has a long history of experience in canon law. Among his various degrees, he earned a licentiate in canon law in 1982 and a doctorate in canon law in 1984, both from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

From 1985 to 1994, he was a visiting professor of canon law at the Pontifical Gregorian University. In 1989, Pope John Paul II named him defender of the bond of the Supreme Court of the Apostolic Signature. He served in that role until his installment as bishop of La Crosse, Wis., in 1995. He also holds memberships in several canon law societies throughout the world.

Archbishop Burke was to depart for Italy July 1. He will first make a stop in Florence to attend priestly ordinations for the Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest. From there, he was to go to Rome to meet with the staff of the Apostolic Signature.

The archbishop is expected to return to St. Louis July 10, and he will spend his final weeks tending to the last-minute business of the archdiocese and preparing for his permanent move to Rome. He is expected to be in Rome for his new assignment Aug. 22.

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